



Mike McGinn
Mayor

Diane Sugimura
Director, DPD

Marshall Foster
Planning Director, DPD

Mary Johnston
Chair

Julie Bassuk

Graham Black

Brendan Connolly

Malika Kirkling

Laurel Kunkler

Thomas Nelson

Julie Parrett

Osama Quotah

Norie Sato

Donald Vehige

Valerie Kinast
Coordinator

Tom Iurino
Senior Staff



**Department of Planning
and Development**
700 5th Avenue, Suite 2000
PO Box 34019
Seattle, WA 98124-4019

TEL 206-615-1349
FAX 206-233-7883

February 15, 2011

Honorable Council President
Richard Conlin
600 Fourth Ave
Seattle, WA 98124

Subject: Amendments to the downtown sign regulations

Dear Council President Conlin,

The Seattle Design Commission appreciates the opportunity to comment on the proposed amendments to the Municipal Code regarding signage on the top portions of tall buildings in downtown. We have held several meetings on the subject, heard public testimony, and educated ourselves on the details of the proposed amendments, and considered what is allowed in other cities in the United States and abroad.

Our conclusion is that we cannot at this time support the amendment. Our purview and expertise lies within the design disciplines and our mission statement begins with the mandate to "champion design excellence in the public realm". It is through this lens that we have approached the task of advising the Council. Ultimately, we asked ourselves the simple question: "Will this amendment improve and enhance the public realm?" The answer we came to was no. The signs as allowed in the ordinance will not improve our skyline or support many of our civic goals stated in the Comprehensive Plan.

We do, however have some observations regarding the role of signage in Seattle in general and its place in the urban environment. There was significant support on the Commission for



devising some principles to help guide the City through future decisions such as these amendments, and the following observations can be a start to such a task.

- Downtown Seattle's setting and its skyline are an enormous aesthetic, economic, and cultural asset to the City of Seattle. Our skyline's appearance and the vantage points from which it can be viewed are unique to this place. The City should ensure that anything that alters that appearance does not detract from its overall value, signature vistas, or architectural resources.
- A city is not a museum. Seattle is a lively and creative city. It changes and evolves and should be a place of diversity and vitality. We repeatedly referenced beloved signs throughout our city and acknowledged the possibility that a sign we are skeptical of today could become a well-loved icon in the future.
- Signs are not necessarily negative additions to the built downtown fabric. Signs that the public interacts with from street level add interest and liveliness to the urban experience as well as deliver information. The City should do its best to regulate signage in a way that enhances urban vitality and allows innovation while enriching the overall aesthetic quality and comfort of the pedestrian realm.
- The Seattle skyline has a myriad of view corridors and location conditions that might preclude a uniform regulatory approach. Each signage opportunity is distinct, and may warrant a careful review that may or may not correspond to a surrounding precedent on a different building or facet of the skyline. Also, the daytime and night time impacts of signs need to be considered independently.
- Advancements in building, illumination and media technology need to be considered when deciding what will be allowed on our buildings. In this rapidly changing environment it is strongly suggested that the City of Seattle take a visionary stance regarding media of any kind that is well-integrated into building design. The field of communications and marketing is also evolving rapidly. Regulation of signage should take into consideration the various purposes of signage from branding and advertising to identification and wayfinding.
- Sustainability and the use of renewable energy should be a prime consideration when regulating signage or anything in our city. Seattle could and should be on the cutting edge of applying such standards to the regulation of signage.

The Design Commission would be pleased to review and advise on this issue as it evolves in the future. We will gladly participate in further discussions about revisions of the sign code. If the Council decides to move forward with this amendment, the Design Commission strongly suggests it be consulted prior to approval of final wording and provisions.



To reference the Design Commission's mission again, it is our mandate to "ensure that the city's built environment makes Seattle a world-class example of sustainable urban design that strengthens community, public life and economic prosperity". We believe that those goals are best served by not amending the sign code as proposed at this time.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this matter. We hope our observations will be useful to the Council.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Mary Johnston", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Mary Johnston, Chair
Seattle Design Commission

cc: Mayor Mike McGinn
Seattle City Councilmembers
Diane Sugimura, Marshall Foster, John Skelton, Mike Podowski; DPD
Ethan Raup, Liz Birkholz; Mayor's Office
Sara Belz, Council Central Staff